

The Truth About Seemingly “Out of the Blue” Behaviors

Dogs rarely do anything without warning.

“All of a sudden he just took off after the squirrel.”

“I don’t know what happened, one second he was there, and the next he was chasing the kid on the bike.”
 “Without any warning at all, she just snapped at the other dog.”

As surprised as we may be by canine behavior sometimes, dogs rarely do anything “out of the blue.” The problem is not that they aren’t warning us, but that we are missing the signals. Dogs are constantly telling us what they are feeling or what they are about to do. We just aren’t listening.

You can become a better dog handler and trainer by simply paying attention to your dog. You will start to notice your dog’s cues and signals and will be able to prevent unwanted behaviors before they happen. As with most things, prevention is more effective than trying to fix a problem after it has occurred.

WHAT WARNING SIGNALS DO I LOOK FOR?

Every dog’s signals are going to be a bit different. They have different body types, ear types, facial structures, etc. Each of these physical differences means that their signals will look different. But in general, dogs communicate with body language “packages.” So to effectively read your dog’s signals, you need to pay attention to the whole dog, not just one part of their body.

Some of the easier things you’ll notice are:

Tail	Low or High?	Relaxed or Rigid?	Wagging Broadly or Tightly?
Ears	Flat or Perked?	Relaxed?	
Mouth	Lips Tight or Relaxed?	Open or Closed?	
Body	High and Forward?	Low and Crouched?	Relaxed?
Fur	Laying Flat?	Spiked (Hackled)?	

Get a feel for how your dog looks when you know he’s excited, nervous, afraid, angry or relaxed. Once you are able to recognize some basic body language, start looking for some of the more subtle signals. These subtle signals are some of the most informative signals you can get from your dog, so it is important to understand what they mean when you see them.

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Some of the more subtle areas to watch include:

Mouth	Whiskers forward or back (Harder to see on dogs with darker muzzles)	Lips tight /curled or relaxed	
Feet	On toes, leaning forward	Relaxed on pads	Slunk back on heels
Eyes	Staring intently (“Keying”)	Relaxed	Wide-eyed or Whale-eyed (whites showing)

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU NOTICE WARNING SIGNALS FOR UNWANTED BEHAVIOR.

When you notice warning signals (subtle or advanced) the best approaches for regaining your dog’s attention is by calling them over to you, leading them away from the stimulus or offering treats as a distraction. This may take some time and practice, so be prepared for the possibility that, despite your best efforts, your dog may still bolt. Be sure to have a good hold on their leash at all times!

Other helpful resources:

- “Canine Body Language” by the ASPCA
- “When Good Dogs Have Bad Days” by Dr. Amy Marder, V.M.D.

Some excellent additional resources on this topic are:

- How to Speak Dog by Stanley Coren
- Calming Signals by Turid Rugass (Book and Video)
- The Other End of the Leash by Patricia McConnell